

Planters and Merchants Insurance Company
60 St. Michael Street
Mobile
Mobile County
Alabama

HABS No. ALA-777

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113-

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ALA-777

PLANTERS AND MERCHANTS INSURANCE COMPANY

HABS
ALA,
49-MOBI,

Location: 60 St. Michael Street, Mobile, Mobile County, Alabama 113-
Geographic Location Code: 01-2100-097

Present Use: Demolished in 1968 for the Water Street Urban Renewal Project.

Statement of Significance: This structure is a good example of the small office buildings constructed at the end of the nineteenth century. The facade was undoubtedly influenced by Richardson's designs, and this style is unusual in Mobile, where most buildings continued to be derived from "Classical" sources.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 18⁹⁶~~68~~, as stated on a plaque that crowns the facade.
2. Architect: Rudolph Benz
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Planters and Merchants Insurance Company purchased this site from the Mobile Navigation and Mutual Insurance Company in 1868. There was a two-story brick building on the site, but this was destroyed by fire and was replaced in 1896 by the existing structure. Only three years after its completion, the building was sold to Charles H. Hearin, who again sold it in 1901 to Leopold Eichold. Ownership was maintained by the Eichold Realty & Investment Co. until demolition in 1968, and the last occupant was the Cowles Printing Company.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

Rudolph Benz was a graduate of the Polytechnical School of Stuttgart, Germany, and settled in Mobile after working as an architect in New York, Chicago, and St. Louis. Besides the Planters and Merchants Insurance Company, he designed the Cotton Exchange, the Chamber of Commerce building, the "English Block", the Masonic building, the residences of Frank McCoy, M. Forchheimer, T.G. Bush, William H. Barney and others, all in Mobile, the courthouses of Baldwin County, Alabama, Escambia County, Florida, and Clark County, Mississippi, the Collegiate Institute at Greenville, Alabama, and the Pruden Institute at

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Pruden, Alabama.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Mobile Deed Books, Probate Court Record Division,
Mobile County

2. Secondary and published sources:

Mobile City Directories, Mobile Public Library

"Mobile, Her Relations to the New South," Mobile
Pamphlets, Vol.I, 1887-88, p. 104

Prepared by Linda Carroll
Student Historian
August 29, 1966
and
Charles A. Herrington
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
July 13, 1972

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This commercial structure is one of the few examples of the Richardsonian-style Romanesque Revival buildings in Mobile. In addition, it was designed by a well-known and active local architect.
2. Condition of fabric: The building was not well maintained before demolition in 1968.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: A two-story office building with party walls and interior dimensions of 18'-4" x 61'-10", the interior is a clear span and the facade is divided into two narrow bays flanking a wider central bay.
2. Foundations: Not accessible

3. Wall construction, finish and color: Rear and party walls are constructed of red brick. The facade (south) is faced with rusticated limestone in ashlar pattern. ALA
4. Structural system, framing: There is wooden floor and roof framing. 49-MOB
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5. Porches: On the second floor, south front, there is a cast-iron balcony in the central bay, with matching iron railings in the second-floor windows in the end bays.
6. Chimneys: On the east party wall, there are three low brick chimneys capped with tall twin terra cotta chimney pots that have a decorative band at the top.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entire architectural effect of the south facade is based on the treatment of maximum glass area for functional purposes within a "revival-style" stone-faced wall, resulting in a pleasingly proportioned facade in wood, limestone and red granite. On the first floor, two simply treated wooden doors in the end bays flank the central bay opening, which is wide and arched. This opening is framed by polished red granite columns with limestone pedestals, bases, and capitals, the latter carved in a Romanesque-like pattern. A wooden architrave separates the lower portion from the single glazed tympanum, which in turn is framed by limestone voussoirs. The wooden architrave extends behind the columns over the doorways in the end bays and is treated with a small spool moulding. The lower portion of the arched bay is filled with a wooden system of three glazed in-swinging casements, painted red. The center casement is framed by small engaged and stylized romanque columns also painted red. Panelled wood is inserted below the sills of the windows. Over each of the doors in the end bays is a large square-shaped transom that pivots. The east door leads directly to the second floor, and the west door is the sole access to the first floor. The rear door on the first floor has been sealed with temporary materials. On the second floor, maximum light and ventilation is obtained by single-light glazed casements, below and above which are large single-glazed openings. The central bay is again defined by smaller polished red granite columns and a cast-iron balcony, with two red-painted wooden engaged columns with stylized capitals. There is no decorative wooden trim on the second floor openings.

- b. Windows: In addition to the casement windows on the south front, described above, there are two wide arched window openings on the first-floor north wall, containing double-hung wooden sash with two-over-two lights. Above are two narrow, high, arched openings, also with double-hung wooden sash with two-over-two lights. Another small window is found over the sealed door.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a single slope to the rear (north) covered with modern composition roll roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There are no cornices or eaves. However, the south front wall continues up into a decorative limestone parapet rising to the center as a decorated shield with a stylized cotton bale and the incised date, "1896". A stepped brick parapet caps the two party walls on the east and west.
- c. Dormers, cupolas: There is a large glazed skylight (8' x 12') to admit light to the interior of the second floor.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: On the first floor, disregarding existing wallboard partitions to accommodate the present occupant, there appears to have been a single large office space, extending the width of the building, except for the enclosed stairway on the west front, and a spacious private office and bath at the rear. There is evidence that the glazed interior partition has been moved northward 7'-6" from its original location. Access to the second floor is gained only by an enclosed wooden stairway that leads directly to the street. The upstairs foyer continues along the west wall as a corridor, terminating in a bathroom. To the right of the corridor there is a line of three rooms separated by glazed partitions. Assuming that the existing fireplaces were originally centered on these rooms, it appears that the partition between the front (south) office and the one in the center has been relocated north of its original position.
2. Stairways: There is one enclosed stairway from the street.
3. Flooring: The first floor is concrete and the second floor has narrow wooden boards.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls of the first floor are plaster above panelled wooden wainscoting. The first-floor ceiling is also panelled wood throughout. On the second floor, the walls are papered plaster above a beaded wooden wainscot. All original interior partitions consist of double-hung windows with one-over-one lights over a panelled or beaded wooden wainscot with a vertical beaded wooden cornice panel above. Doors set in these partitions are panelled with a single glazed panel in the upper portion and a single-light transom above.
5. Special decorative features, trim: There is a uniformity in all wooden trim and panelling on both floors. Main horizontal and vertical members are beaded, except at the intersection where slightly projecting square blocks, treated with concentric circles, are used. This same treatment occurs at the intersections of the main members of the ceiling panelling.
6. Notable hardware: All door hinges and escutcheons are embossed with fleur-de-lis designs.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: All fireplaces are shallow with small cast-iron grates, surrounded by mottled glazed rectangular tiles and wooden mantelpieces. All are intact and in place except for one which was removed from the rear room on the first floor. This mantelpiece, which is the most ornate, is presently stored on the second floor.
 - b. Lighting: Modern electric lighting has been installed. There are no traces of early fixtures.

D. General setting and orientation:

The building is located approximately in the middle of the block on the north side of St. Michael Street, facing south, between Royal and Water Streets. This street was one of the important commercial streets in Mobile at the end of the nineteenth century.

Prepared by Woodrow W. Wilkins
Supervising Architect
National Park Service
July 1, 1966

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared as a cooperative project during the summer of 1966 between the Historic American Buildings Survey and various agencies, organizations, and individuals of the City of Mobile. The Historic American Buildings Survey supplied the project supervisor, Woodrow W. Wilkins, and three draughtsmen, Carl J. Rosenberg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Michael R. Foil (Auburn University), and Lowell K. West (University of Kentucky). One draughtsman, Elbert L. Coleman (Alabama A & M), was provided by the Mobile Housing Board, which agency administers urban renewal. The services of an additional draughtsman, James Eley, specifically designated as an architectural student from Auburn University, was made possible by contributions from numerous local architects and businessmen. The Historic Mobile Preservation Society, in agreement with the History Department of Springhill College, provided a student historian, Linda Carroll. Office space was supplied by the City of Mobile through the City Planning Commission. Roy Thigpen, a local photographer, was contracted to supply the photographs. All local arrangements were made by the Mobile Historic Development Commission, Mrs. Nancy N. Holmes, President. The project was edited during the summer of 1972 by Charles A. Herrington, Architectural Historian, in a cooperative effort between the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Mobile Historic Development Commission.